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Japan's Ruling Party: Creative Adjustment to New Challenges

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A Research Paper

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A Research Paper

This paper was prepared by [] the
Office of East Asian Analysis. Comments and queries
are welcome and may be directed to the Chief,
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**Japan's Ruling Party:
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Summary

*Information available
as of 24 June 1985
was used in this report.*

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and close US-Japanese relations have been synonymous for three decades. Washington has relied on the ruling party's continued concern for the health of the relationship, regardless of the LDP faction leader chosen as prime minister. We believe the LDP will probably dominate Japanese politics and champion close ties with the United States into the 1990s, but shifts in Japan's political landscape are altering the way the party does business and its ability to manage the US-Japanese relationship.

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The economic achievements that are the basis of the party's legitimacy have eroded its traditional base of support in the countryside as rapid industrialization has drawn farmers into the cities and weakened their conservative political orientation. The party, consequently, has been forced to turn increasingly toward the less predictable urban vote. The contraction in the proportion of LDP loyalists and the difficulty of recruiting support from the growing number of uncommitted voters, as well as the increase in intraparty factionalism over the past decade, have stimulated a sense of political vulnerability in all Liberal Democrats—party and faction leaders as well as individual Dietmen. With electoral support close to the 50-percent mark, shifts in even small blocks of votes could threaten the LDP's political monopoly.

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Far from being immobilized by economic and social change, the LDP has displayed impressive resilience and creativity in responding to these challenges:

- The party has used its long period of uninterrupted control to create a capable central policymaking organization experienced in devising programs that appeal to a wide variety of voters.
- The party has been able to deepen its grassroots ties through the formidable nationwide networks built by faction leaders and the personalized support groups assembled by individual Dietmen.
- LDP politicians have also developed ingenious new ways to mobilize votes and money, most notably by brokering agreements and mediating conflicts between interest groups and government ministries.

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The LDP's struggle for survival also has thrust it deep into the policymaking arena traditionally dominated by Japan's elite bureaucracy. At the same time, increasingly contentious and complex trade, security, and foreign policy issues have proved more and more difficult for the rigidly organized ministries to resolve, particularly when these issues cannot be

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insulated from the domestic political arena. Only the party can make the high-level political decisions needed to balance foreign and domestic objectives, and these decisions are determined primarily by influential Liberal Democratic politicians with formal or informal jurisdiction over particular policy areas. As a result, the LDP's influence over policy is expanding relative to that of the ministries. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] With the LDP intruding more deeply into the details of policy and interest groups being activated by foreign challenges, it is no longer sufficient to focus on the bureaucracy. [REDACTED]

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The LDP's evolving role in policymaking may also make progress on bilateral issues more difficult as the party becomes more sensitive to the possibility that a misstep could hurt it at the polls. The progressive opening of the Japanese market in particular will almost certainly have social, economic, and political repercussions important to the party or individual LDP Dietmen anxious to retain the allegiance of critical sources of support. Even so, we believe the ruling party can go further toward accommodating the United States than it often alleges without seriously damaging its domestic support base. But the LDP, as it becomes more involved in managing a broader range of competing interests, is increasingly likely to cite its politically exposed position to fend off US pressure on such issues as opening Japan's market and doing more in defense. [REDACTED]

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Japan's Ruling Party: Creative Adjustment to New Challenges

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Adapting to a Changing Electorate

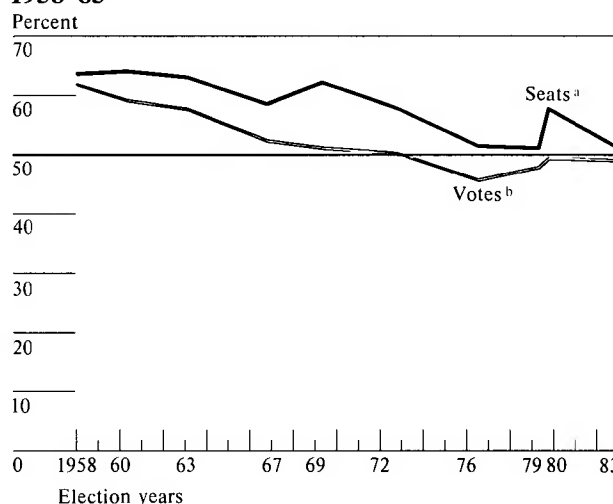
The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has dominated Japanese politics since it was founded in 1955. The LDP owes its continued ability to attract votes largely to Japan's success in sustaining the highest rate of economic growth of any major country, an achievement for which the party has claimed much of the credit. The economic success that has carried the party to repeated electoral victories, however, has also brought social changes that have led to politically important shifts in voter attitudes. As industrialization has pulled population into the cities, the LDP's base in rural areas has contracted. Moreover, as Japan has moved up the technological ladder, a more sophisticated industrial marketplace has demanded a better educated work force, and this in turn has altered traditional political allegiances.

In the 1960s, Japanese and foreign observers believed these economic, demographic, and social trends would lead inexorably to the decline of the Liberal Democrats. Most assumed newly urbanized workers would join labor unions and switch their votes to one of the opposition parties. On the basis of straight line projections, they forecast an end to LDP dominance, followed by a Socialist-led coalition government.

Until the mid-1970s, much of the data seemed to confirm these predictions. Public opinion polls and election statistics indicated the electoral tide was running against the ruling party. (See appendix A for an analysis of changes in the Japanese electorate.) The LDP's share of the popular vote declined steadily, finally falling below 50 percent for the first time in 1976, although the party never quite lost its majority in the Diet's politically dominant lower house (see figure 1).

Challenge From Uncommitted Urban Voters. The long-term weakening of the LDP's position was in part a consequence of the political formula the party used—and still relies on—to maintain its hold on

Figure 1
LDP Support Trends: Share of Votes and Seats in Lower House Diet Elections, 1958-83



^a Includes pro-LDP independents who were recognized as closely linked with the ruling party or joined it after the election.

^b Includes estimated votes for pro-LDP independents.

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power. This strategy has been based on a massive transfer of wealth from the cities to the countryside (see table):

- LDP governments have heavily subsidized farmers, not only through the high rice price, but through a host of programs targeted on farmers or small towns and villages.
- Rural areas have benefited disproportionately from both public works and revenue subsidies to local governments.

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Urban and Rural Shares of Taxes, Government Spending, and Political Power in 1980

	Urban Zone (nine most populous prefectures)	Rural Zone (remaining 38 prefectures)
Population	50	50
National taxes	71	29
Public works projects	44	56
Revenue grants	26	74
Lower house seats	40	60
LDP Diet members	31	69

- The tax system favors rural over urban population groups. By 1980, according to one Japanese scholar, only 10 percent of farm families paid taxes on farm income while 83 percent of wage earners paid taxes.

The ruling party has been reluctant to make basic revisions in this formula because it has worked well, both for the LDP as a whole and for powerful individual LDP politicians. In return for government assistance, rural Japan has provided the party with a steady flow of political donations and a critical block of votes. Given the longstanding mismatch of voting population and Diet representation that has favored the countryside, this used to be sufficient to ensure LDP command of the legislature.

There were limits, however, on the ability of Japan's gerrymandered election system to compensate for the continued movement of population into urban areas. The Supreme Court periodically obliged the government to redistribute lower house seats in order to correct the worst abuses. Although the minor adjustments expected this year probably will not damage the party, future changes will be more painful. In addition, the transition of the Japanese economy to a relatively low rate of growth, combined with the fiscal austerity mandated by large budget deficits and a policy of not increasing taxes, meant that resources necessary to finance the classic LDP political strategy were no longer as abundant as they once were.

Figure 2
Party Support by Degree of Urbanization, 1983^a

Percent

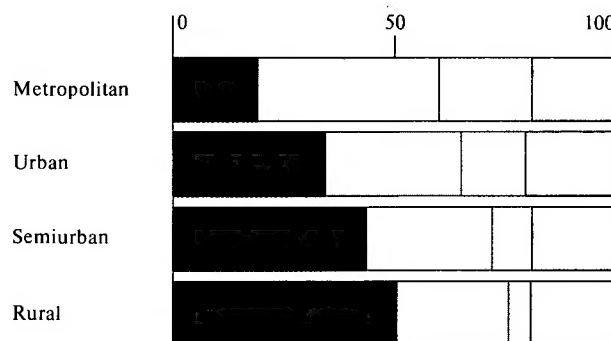
Legend

■ LDP

□ Nonvoters

□ Moderate opposition

□ Leftwing opposition



^a Percent of electorate at time of December 1983 lower house election.

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The strategy of taking resources out of the cities for the benefit of the countryside also carried with it significant costs and risks. LDP politicians have had great difficulty competing successfully in urban constituencies. Indeed, LDP support is inversely related to the degree of urbanization, in part, we believe, because city voters recognize the allocation of state burdens and benefits is not to their advantage (see figure 2).

In the late 1970s, the Liberal Democrats began to be troubled at the polls by a new problem: short-term but dramatic swings in support, which Japanese scholars attribute to the so-called uncommitted or floating

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Pitfalls of the Multimember District

In contrast to the United States, where each electoral district sends only one representative to Congress, the Japanese system calls for electing several Dietmen from each constituency. This makes the Japanese political game considerably more complicated than the American. [redacted]

The 511 members of the lower house are elected from 130 constituencies. All but one single-member district send three to five representatives to the Diet. Each voter, however, may cast his ballot for only one representative. Candidates are ranked by the number of votes they receive, and the top three, four, or five—depending on the number of representatives assigned to the district—are declared winners. [redacted]

Devising an optimal strategy in so complex a setting has many pitfalls. Political parties naturally want to elect as many of their candidates as possible, but to do this it is not sufficient simply to get out the vote. If too few candidates are put forward, votes can be wasted. For the LDP, the more common problem is fielding too many, thereby spreading the votes of its supporters too thin. Increased factional competition is exacerbating this problem. Many conservatives who are sponsored by LDP factions but denied party

endorsement run as independents. Some win and subsequently join the LDP; others, however, undercut the official candidate, causing both to go down in defeat. In the 1983 elections, 61 LDP candidates lost by narrow margins; 25 of these were defeated by fellow Liberal Democrats. [redacted]

The margin between victory and defeat is often slim. In the last lower house election, for example, it was less than 2,000 votes in 18 election districts. Minor shifts at the district level can have a surprising cumulative impact on the party as a whole. Overall, the multimember system magnifies the impact of changes in voter support for the LDP:

- *In the 1980 lower house election, a 3.3-percent increase in the Liberal Democrats' share of the vote produced almost four times as large an increase in their share of seats in the lower house.*
- *In 1983 a 1-percent decline in the vote share triggered an 11-percent decline in the party's share of seats (see figure 1).* [redacted]

vote. The portion of the electorate disengaged from politics or prone to erratic shifts in party support expanded significantly. These uncommitted voters appeared to be disenchanted with conservative as well as leftwing platforms and preoccupied primarily with personal issues. They also tended to be concentrated in cities. For many years, the LDP has been able to depend on only about one-third of the electorate for loyal support. Victory at the polls now depends on [redacted] winning over the elusive "floaters," and attracting the politically alienated. [redacted]

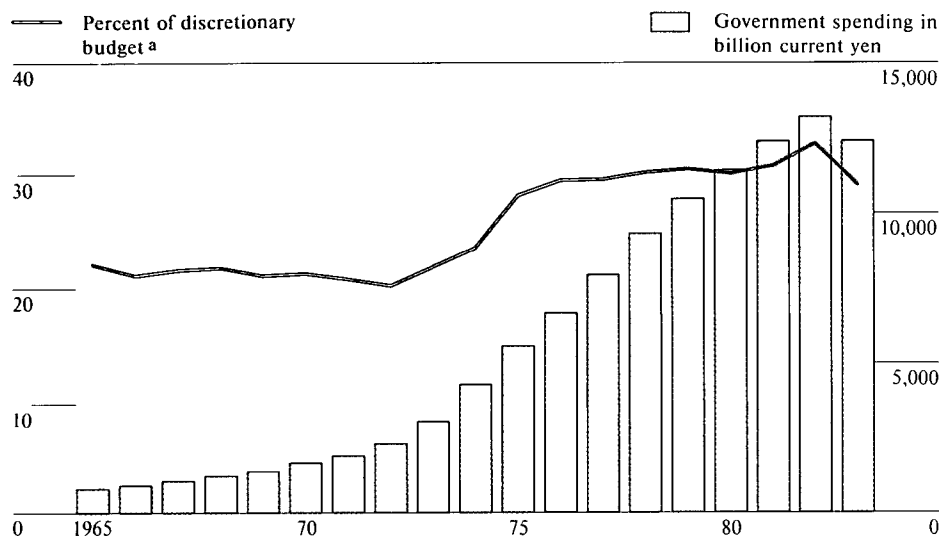
The uncommitted urban voters have held the balance of power between the ruling party and its rivals since 1976. As a result, we believe that unpredictable fluctuations in LDP support must be expected (see appendix A). Although the party has given itself a

political cushion by ensuring that its rural stronghold continues to be overrepresented in the Diet, small changes in voter support can have a large impact on the party's position in the lower house because of the peculiarities of the Japanese election system. [redacted]

The LDP's Response. As early as 1970, the LDP recognized that the decline in voter support was reaching dangerously low levels and that broad sections of the electorate were eluding traditional forms of political recruitment. In an effort to recoup, the party began to stake out the high ground on issues of concern to those most affected by Japan's economic and social transformation—the growing number of

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Figure 3
Government Spending on Social Security, 1965-83



^a General account budget less debt servicing.

[Redacted]

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aged, those troubled by and increasingly vocal about the environmental problems accompanying urbanization and industrialization, and those bypassed during the years of rapid economic growth. As cases in point, the first antipollution laws were passed in 1970; the Environment Agency was established in 1972; and in 1973 the party set in motion a rapid expansion of government-funded social services (see figure 3). Japanese political analysts attribute much of the improvement in the party's appeal by the end of the decade to progress in correcting environmental problems and in upgrading pension plans, medical insurance, and social welfare. [Redacted]

The process of identifying problems, communicating with those affected, and devising new programs had a strong effect on the LDP. It enhanced the party's political attractiveness to groups that previously had

not identified with conservative politicians, their local organizations, or their national party. Japanese analyses of the electorate show that, although the LDP still has difficulty attracting urban voters, the party today has a presence in every corner of Japan and draws support from almost every category of the population. Middle-aged and older Japanese continue to favor the LDP, but voters in their twenties have also turned toward the party. Majorities of farmers and fishermen, self-employed professionals, managers, and operators of small businesses usually back the party but so do about one-fourth of blue-collar and one-third of white-collar workers. Indeed, many voters who publicly claim to be opposition party supporters privately tell pollsters they actually vote for the Liberal Democrats. [Redacted]

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In addition to their skill in reaching out to new constituencies, the Liberal Democrats have also been better positioned than their rivals to cope with political crosscurrents:

- The LDP's long-term domination of Japanese politics has led many groups that depend on government help to develop solid symbiotic relationships with the party. Agriculture organizations are the best known, but doctors, veterans, fishermen, and small businesses are also important sources of support.
- Through its control of the redistricting process, the LDP has been able to rig the election system in its favor.
- The fact that the LDP has held power for three decades indicates the electorate is basically conservative in its political orientation. Older Japanese still remember—and fear—the chaos and poverty of the early postwar years and distrust leftist ideologies. Younger Japanese tend to be pragmatic materialists more interested in improving their economic well-being than in promoting radical political change. Asahi Shimbun polls show the Japanese now favor the LDP over all opposition parties combined.
- It has helped, too, that the LDP is blessed with [redacted] unattractive rivals. The opposition camp is splintered into five habitually antagonistic parties incapable of sustained cooperation and burdened—in the view of most Japanese—with irrelevant ideological baggage. Voter support for the opposition has fluctuated in recent elections, but the trend line is downward.

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The net result of the LDP's new responses, combined with its structural advantages, was that in 1976 the long decline in LDP support bottomed out. Since then, opinion polls have shown public attitudes toward the party improving, and the LDP's share of the popular vote has expanded. [redacted]

Evolution Toward a Stronger Policy Role

The resilience and adaptability the Liberal Democrats have displayed in responding to rapid changes in Japanese society have also helped strengthen the LDP's hand in Tokyo, where its power has grown

relative to that of the national bureaucracy. The ruling party, through its control of the Cabinet, has always had nominal authority over the ministries.

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[redacted] early years, moreover, the party's capacity for independent policymaking was weak. Over time, however, its tenure in power has permitted it to create a large party organization capable of devising and overseeing a wide variety of programs, many of them initially launched to appeal to the floating vote. This organization is increasingly recognized as a center of decision-making in Tokyo. The growth in the party's influence in the policymaking process has not been abrupt nor has it occurred across the board. Nonetheless, all commentary points in the same direction: a definite shift is taking place in the balance of power between the ruling party and the traditionally dominant bureaucracy. [redacted]

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Reinforcing this shift are the dynamics of the intra-party power struggle, which has driven LDP faction leaders to develop new methods of expanding their political resources, frequently at the expense of the national bureaucracy. The countermeasures individual Dietmen have devised in response to threatening changes in voter attitudes have often had a similar effect. [redacted]

Growth of the PARC. Japanese journalists and political scientists observe that the LDP's Policy Affairs Research Council (PARC) is growing more assertive and prevailing more frequently in struggles with government ministries. Policymaking in the party officially centers on the council. Its approval is required before any measure—including proposed new legislation—can be adopted as party policy and forwarded to the Cabinet. When it was established in 1955, the PARC had 15 divisions and nine special research committees. Today, it has 17 divisions, 96 special committees and research commissions, and 128 subcommittees covering—often redundantly—every issue of any conceivable interest to the party

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(see figure 4). Many of these committees are supported by a regular staff; all are backed up by the party secretariat, which now numbers about 300. []

The leaders of the more important committees are usually senior politicians who rank somewhat below the top levels of the party. These midlevel party officials often specialize in a substantive area for many years and acquire expertise unmatched by the career bureaucrats, who shift jobs frequently. They also develop extensive contacts throughout the LDP and in the opposition parties, government ministries, key Diet committees, and constituencies affected by their committee. Their cooperation is indispensable for anyone interested in influencing policy on issues under their committee's jurisdiction. []

The Rise of Zoku. Participation in the council can also lead to recruitment into a *zoku*, or clan. *Zoku* are informal groups of Dietmen, each led by a small cluster of powerful politicians and specializing in overseeing party policy on a specific issue. The *zoku* operate as a highly influential parallel system within the PARC. All work on the same principle: LDP politicians use *zoku* to shape administrative regulations and channel resources—such as tax breaks and subsidies—to benefit existing or potential sources of support. []

The critical function of the *zoku* is to mediate among the many organizations attempting to influence the PARC's decisions and ultimately government policy. The ministries are organized on narrow, functional lines and increasingly are incapable of reaching agreement on new issues, such as the deregulation of telecommunications, that cut across jurisdictions or do not have clear precedents. In addition, influential interest groups frequently are at loggerheads over how to allocate budgetary funds that are no longer expanding as they did in the era of rapid economic growth. With disputes being carried over into the labyrinthine PARC apparatus, the party's policymaking process—and therefore that of the government—was in danger of succumbing to creeping paralysis. The *zoku* seized the opportunity created by this threat and moved in as brokers, adjusting competing interests and forcing compromises on recalcitrant bureaucrats. Because the *zoku* are often the only entities flexible and powerful enough to force the excessively complicated and rigid

**Principal LDP Zoku:
Ranking by Power and Popularity, 1985**

<i>Top</i>	<i>Agriculture</i> <i>Construction</i> <i>Commerce and industry</i>
<i>High</i>	<i>Postal services</i> <i>Communications</i> <i>Transportation</i> <i>Finance</i>
<i>Medium</i>	<i>Education</i> <i>Fishery</i> <i>Welfare</i> <i>Defense</i>
<i>Low</i>	<i>Foreign affairs</i> <i>Judicial</i> <i>Environment</i> <i>Science and technology</i> <i>Labor</i>

[]

party and governmental machinery to act, they are in a position to attract support and exact compliance from all interested parties.¹ []

Japanese scholars and journalists generally list about 16 major *zoku*. Their importance tends to vary directly with their potential for securing money and votes. Where this linkage is weak (as in the case of labor), weakening (as with fisheries), or almost nonexistent (as with foreign, judicial, or environmental affairs), the popularity of the "clan" with LDP politicians is low, and its power cannot compare with that of one of the major *zoku* machines. The universally recognized "big three" are agriculture, construction, and commerce and industry (see appendix C). []

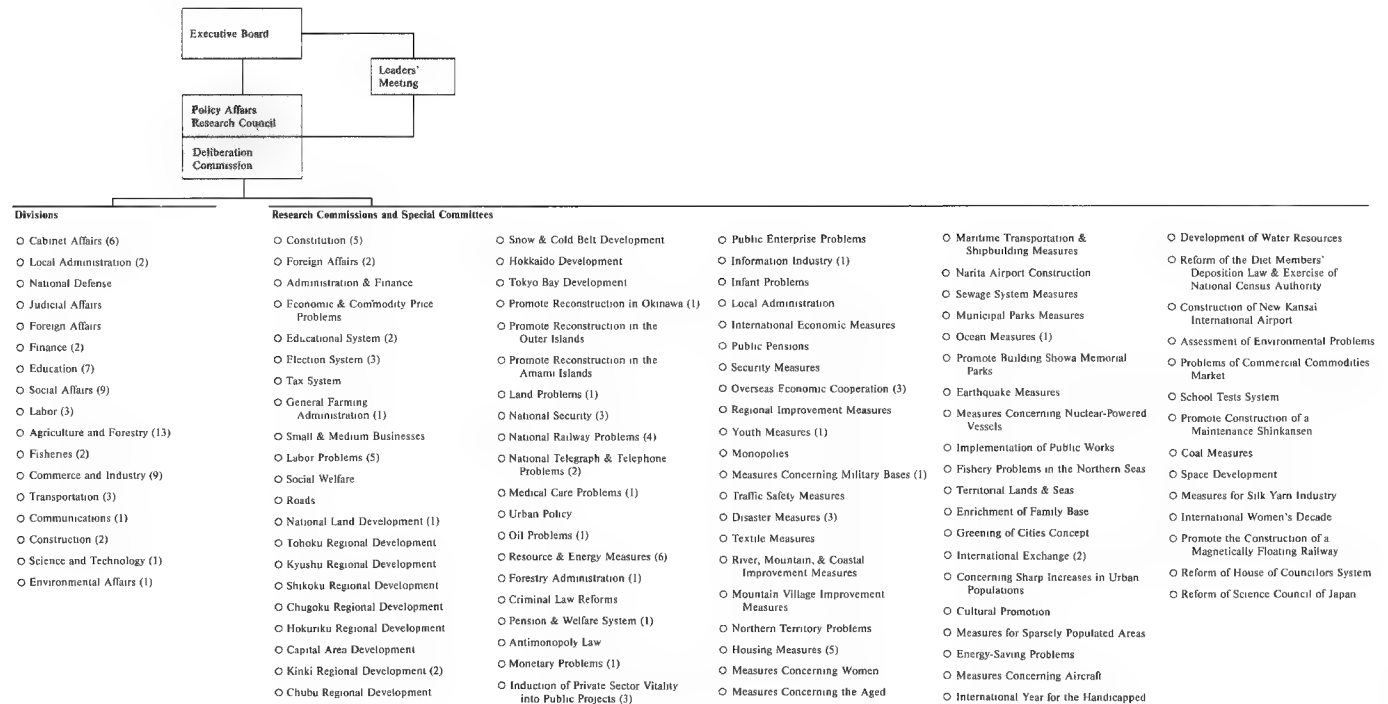
The New Policymaking Environment: US Equities
The United States will have the LDP as a political partner for some time to come. Nonetheless, the

¹ The formal PARC structure and the informal *zoku* network parallel, but are separate from, the Diet committee system. []

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Figure 4
Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Policymaking Structure^a



^a Figures in parentheses indicate number of subordinate committees

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Struggle for Survival Promotes LDP Activism

The expansion of PARC and the growth of zoku have both been driven by the struggle for political survival in the LDP. That struggle has gone on at two levels: between party faction leaders and among individual LDP Dietmen. [redacted]

Factional Competition. As the LDP's contingent in the Diet gradually declined, the factions became locked in a zero-sum game: if some expanded, the others inevitably contracted. Subjected to growing political pressure by the intensifying intraparty power struggle, leaders had to mobilize more resources to protect their factional power bases. The increased rivalry that began in 1972, when the late Prime Minister Sato stepped down and Kakuei Tanaka and Takeo Fukuda fought over the succession, further contributed to stepped-up factional conflict. [redacted]

One consequence was an expansion of LDP factional organizations throughout the country and down to the district level (see appendix B on Local Support Structures). Another was the proliferation of PARC committees and subcommittees, which faction leaders used to enhance their influence over official policy and thus their ability to extract support from interest groups affected by government activities. Factional competition was also a major reason for the leaders' determined effort to win control over, or at least influence, several zoku, which had proved to be lucrative sources of money and votes. As a result, most factions are represented in every zoku, and zoku normally include at least a few representatives from each of the factions. [redacted]

Political Vulnerability. For the individual Dietman, who must cope with a fickle electorate and long years of service to aging party chieftans, the Japanese political game is tough to survive. Conservative politicians who aspire to enter the Diet are finding it harder to win a seat. The volatility of the electorate is making it harder for an aspiring Dietman to patch together the right mix of issues and groups that will enable him to get elected, especially if he is running in

an urban constituency. Given the personalized nature of the party's local organization, newcomers can hope for little help from central party headquarters (see appendix B). Moreover, the high cost of running for office favors the incumbents, who frequently are entrenched in districts with only enough bedrock supporters to elect one LDP Dietman. [redacted]

Conservative politicians who have overcome these obstacles and landed a Diet seat are also finding it increasingly difficult to survive long enough to climb to high office. The attrition rate for incumbent LDP Dietmen has been about 25 percent in recent elections. At the same time, advancement in the party is governed by a rigid, all-pervasive seniority system; and the upper reaches of the party are increasingly dominated by incumbents. In combination, these clog channels of upward mobility for new and midranking Dietmen who used to look to prestigious ministerial or party posts to provide them with the political capital they needed to improve their prospects for reelection. Younger Dietmen now have to wait 20 to 25 years before they advance far enough in the queue to win such a position. By that time about half of them will have been defeated in an election. [redacted]

With access to traditional upper-level positions increasingly restricted, younger LDP Dietmen—particularly those without an inherited support group or extraordinary talents and resources—have pressed the party to create alternative arenas in which they could amass political capital. The expanded Policy Affairs Research Council has filled that need as opportunities to gain visibility have increased with the number of new committees. Membership in several committees also helps a Dietman create the impression of activism and offers him opportunities to gain experience, attract supporters, build alliances, and rise within the party—all of which enhance his ability to serve his constituents and stay in office. For similar reasons, Dietmen have gravitated toward faction leaders in a position to enroll them in a politically profitable zoku. [redacted]

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record of the last 10 years suggests the party's strength in the lower house will continue to fluctuate from a substantial majority that ensures control of the Diet to a bare majority—or less—that periodically requires drawing one of the moderate opposition parties into a coalition government. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] the caution induced in the ruling party by the threat of having to share power—or the political compromises needed to create and sustain a coalition—probably will make the government's management of US-Japanese relations more difficult. [REDACTED]

Moreover, the expansion of the PARC and the proliferation of *zoku* have made the party's policymaking process more intricate. The LDP's normal operating style now involves balancing numerous competing interest groups, government ministries, and their associated *zoku*, together with the opposition parties, the mass media, and foreign organizations. As a result, it is increasingly difficult to calculate whether a claim by Tokyo that it cannot meet a US policy request because of difficult domestic circumstances is a tactical ploy or a realistic assessment of the government's position. [REDACTED]

In our view, the unpredictability of a more fickle electorate, together with the LDP's failure to build a strong, centralized grassroots organization, has made the party more susceptible to interest group pressures. Agriculture or fishing, for example, may be declining, but, with electoral support increasingly unstable, even a relatively small block of assured votes can spell the difference between victory and defeat for many individual LDP Dietmen. For the party as a whole, the farm vote—and the votes of the many Japanese who live in cities but have emotional or family ties to the farm—will remain critical. Moreover, the threat of losing its lower house majority has impelled the party to bring new groups into the fold. Traditionally antagonistic organizations, such as labor unions, today are being courted more actively by the conservatives. [REDACTED]

We believe the most obvious consequences of the LDP's vulnerability, from the US perspective, will be evident in the areas of trade liberalization and defense. On trade issues, rank-and-file Dietmen will probably press the party leadership to avoid concessions that could alienate sources of financial or electoral support. The politically sensitive defense issue will be worrisome because of its always sensational treatment by the media, which shape popular attitudes and, at election times, can influence the behavior of the floating vote. [REDACTED]

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Offsetting the Liberal Democrats' sense of vulnerability is their pride in their party's postwar heritage. In our judgment, success in both attracting popular support and helping Japan reach new heights of power and prestige has given them confidence. Senior party leaders see themselves as national leaders and do not simply respond reflexively to pressures from constituents, interest groups, or foreign governments. The widely held view that the LDP will remain the country's dominant party ensures that interest groups normally will not try to dictate to the party but will prefer instead to bargain. In addition, because of the complexity and inherent checks and balances of the party's policymaking process, no single interest group can expect to purchase automatic compliance by providing votes or political donations. Instead, these usually will only buy access and a receptive hearing. [REDACTED]

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We expect the LDP's organizational strength relative to the traditionally dominant government ministries to continue to grow. The ministries, moreover, have had greater difficulty in presenting a united front to the ruling party, particularly when it has been necessary to balance domestic and foreign policy objectives. Reassessing the nation's security requirements and opening the economy to foreign competition have produced frequent ministerial logjams, which increasingly have forced the bureaucracy to turn to the LDP leadership for high-level political decisions. [REDACTED]

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In our view, these and other difficult issues facing Japan will fuel this process of change in the internal Japanese power balance by drawing the LDP deeper into government policymaking. Although established economic, budgetary, defense, and foreign policies have considerable political momentum, pressures generated by technological change, trade conflicts, and the continued rise in Japan's international standing will force some new and risky departures:

- In cutting-edge sectors of the economy, such as the telecommunications, computer, and service industries, official policy will be compelled to move toward greater internationalization.
- Closer security cooperation with the United States is certain to foster at least a gradual increase in outlays for security, the release of military technology, and more serious preparations for the joint defense of Japan.
- The other industrialized democracies will demand more from Japan as its economic strength continues to rise.

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As foreign policy issues intrude deeper into domestic politics, the process of devising new policies will involve new players in the private as well as the public sector. As a case in point, the LDP today must decide on trade-offs between the interests of emerging groups—technocrats, the new knowledge-intensive industries—and those of the party's old-line backers in declining economic sectors. The party ultimately will be compelled to address these politically charged questions. Given its increased expertise and its proven ability to respond creatively to political challenges, we believe the LDP, more than the turf-conscious, precedent-ridden bureaucracy, will be the real venue for decisionmaking.

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Appendix A

Trends in Political Attitudes and Voting Behavior

For more than two decades after it was established in 1955, the LDP experienced a gradual but steady erosion in its popular appeal. Public opinion polls conducted by the Jiji press, for example, indicated that the number of solid supporters of the ruling party was declining. Others, whose allegiance to the LDP was "soft," confined themselves to expressing a mild preference for conservatives. Similarly, election statistics showed that fewer Japanese eligible to vote were casting their ballots for the LDP² (see figure 5). The bottom line for the party, however, was how it fared at the hands of those who actually voted and how those votes translated into seats in the lower house, which elects the prime minister. Here, too, despite the LDP's ability to use its majority in the legislature to stave off redistricting, the party was losing ground (see figure 1). []

By the late 1970s, however, it was clear that the long decline in LDP support had ended. Public attitudes were more favorable, and the party's share of the popular vote picked up. Our comparisons of public opinion polls and election returns over the past 30 years disclose, however, that much of the political ground regained has not been consolidated. Although many Japanese now harbor a diffuse *preference* for the LDP, fewer are willing to *support* or *vote* for it. Because the bedrock core of LDP loyalists now represents only about one-third of the electorate, the party must attract support from passive conservatives. Liberal Democrats consider many potential recruits

[] well disposed toward the party but will not expend much energy on its behalf. If it rains or snows on election day, if it is a holiday

² The election statistics used in this paper, including figure 5, are slightly different from the official data upon which most postelection commentary and long-term analyses are based. Believing that these statistics systematically understate LDP strength, we have included as LDP Dietmen conservatives elected as Independents who subsequently joined the party and, since 1976, Dietmen who resigned from the LDP after the Lockheed aircraft scandal but are independent in name only—former Prime Minister Tanaka's being the most famous. We believe Japanese voters regard candidates in both categories as virtual Liberal Democrats. For the same reason, we have included in our total for LDP votes an estimated 75 percent of the independent vote. []

season, or, if media reports create the impression that an LDP victory is assured, they often stay home. As a result, the LDP tends to make a poor showing when the voting rate decreases. Those with only a mild conservative orientation are even less dependable. []

The new pattern established since the LDP's position stopped slipping in the late 1970s is one of significant oscillation around a more-or-less stable long-term trend line. In attempting to explain these swings, Japanese scholars have focused on the increased number of uncommitted voters, many of whom appear to be "floaters," shifting between political involvement and passivity and from one party to another. According to Jiji polls, the number of eligible voters in this category—those who decline to express support for any political party—is growing. Election statistics that show a dropoff in voter turnout seem to corroborate the trend (see figure 5). []

Japanese political analysts suggest many of these uncommitted are educated, informed, middle-class Japanese who choose not to participate regularly in politics primarily because they dislike the choices available to them. Japanese commentators also include in this category the politically alienated who are infrequent voters and generally consider themselves outsiders—the poor, uneducated, and uninformed. []

The picture drawn by Japanese analysts of the affluent floating voter incorporates elements of both inertia and volatility. They believe most of these voters are essentially conservative, interested in protecting their gains, and fearful of changes that might disturb the system that supports them. The transition of the Japanese economy to a slower rate of growth has only intensified these concerns, which generally work in favor of the ruling party, guardian of the status quo.

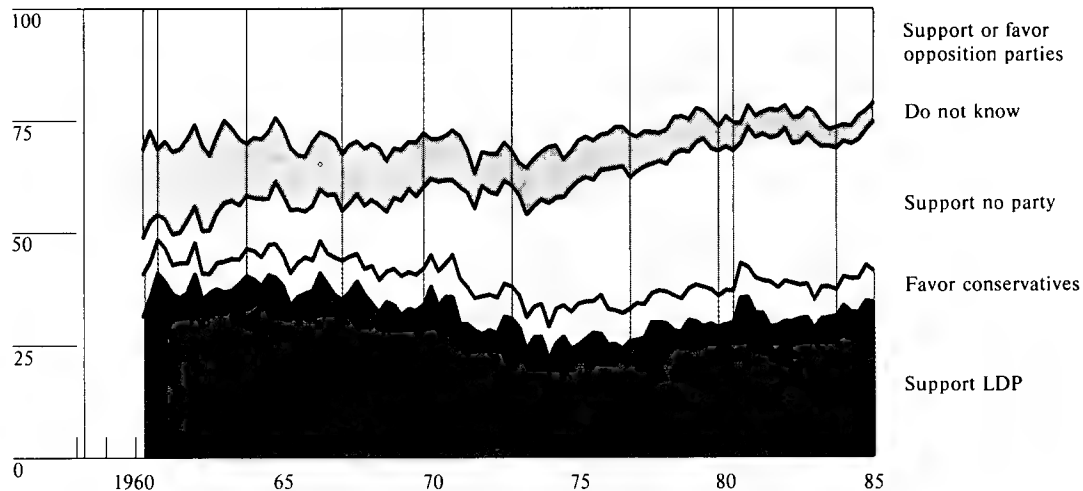
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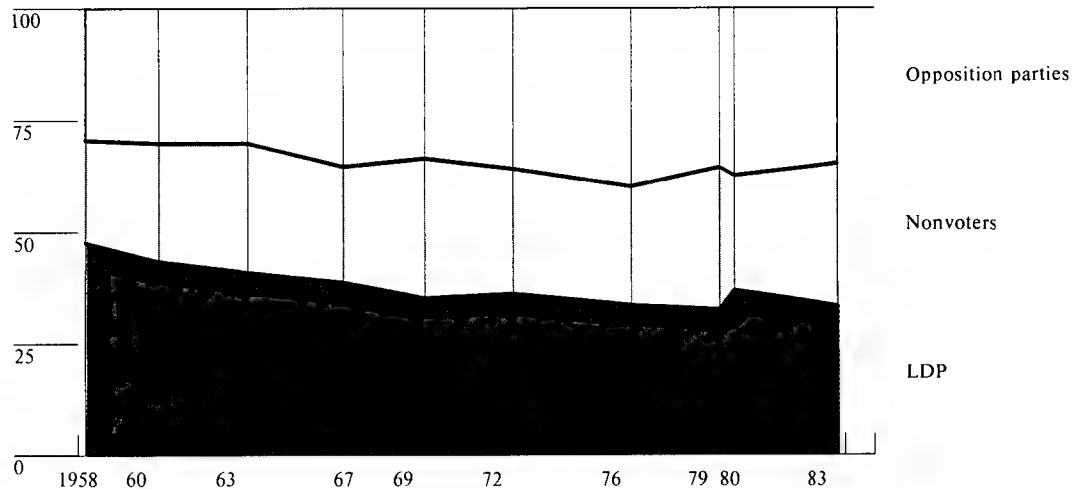
Figure 5
Trends in Party Support

Note: Vertical rules correspond with election dates

Public Opinion, 1960-85^a



Eligible Votes in Lower House Elections,
1958-83^b



^a Data points are quarterly averages based on responses to identical questions posed over a 25-year period in the monthly nationwide poll conducted by the Jiji press.

^b We divided the independent vote between the LDP and the opposition parties and estimated their shares as 75 and 25 percent, respectively. These figures were then incorporated in the total vote for each camp.

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But these uncommitted voters also appear to be politically disengaged and generally distrustful of all political parties, including the LDP.

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At election time, many of these uncommitted voters apparently are ambivalent. They do not want the LDP to be too powerful, yet they do not trust the opposition. As a result, when the ruling party appears to be on the verge of a major victory, these voters are inclined to stay at home, but, when the LDP seems in danger of suffering a serious setback that might disrupt the system, they rally to its defense. These voters also appear to be heavily influenced by the mass media and sometimes overreact to media predictions of an election's outcome.

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The LDP's dependence on the vagaries of the capricious floating voters has increased its sense of vulnerability. Combined with the uncertainties inherent in the election system (see inset, Pitfalls of the Multi-member District), this dependence leaves many LDP Dietmen dangerously exposed at election time and keeps the party perpetually on the verge of having to share power.

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Appendix B

Local Support Structures

In competing with other political parties, the LDP has the advantage of exceptionally strong grassroots organizations, albeit ones that have been created by, and are responsive to, individual Dietmen and their faction leaders more than the party.

Individual

Each LDP Dietman traditionally builds his own *koenkai*, a support group based in his local district. Japanese observers have noted that in recent years many *koenkai* have come to dominate district politics, maintaining their cohesion after the death or retirement of the Dietman who founded them and often transferring their support to his political heir—usually his child, relative, or personal secretary. Collectively, the *koenkai* represent a formidable, if compartmented, nationwide political machine capable of mobilizing millions of votes and large sums of money.

Factional

The LDP's Tokyo-based factions have also expanded their organizations throughout Japan in order to mobilize resources for their intraparty battles. In 1975, in an effort to ameliorate bitter infighting, senior party leaders reformed the method of choosing the party president so that rank-and-file LDP members could vote in primary elections. These reforms ended by exacerbating the problem, as each faction leader tried to strengthen his position in the primaries by recruiting as many party members as possible. During the buildup to the first "democratic" LDP presidential election, for example, party membership tripled, from 455,000 in 1977 to 1.4 million in 1978. In appearance, therefore, the party has a large national membership, which today stands at about 1.5 million. In fact, however, for almost all of these Liberal Democrats, loyalty goes first to the Dietman who represents their district and the faction leader who sponsors him and only second to the party.

Party

Despite the impressive strength of the *koenkai* network and the growing overlay of faction-based structures, the LDP still has a basic weakness: it lacks a powerful, centralized organization capable of supporting and exerting control over individual party members. The LDP has succeeded in creating a large, functionally differentiated apparatus at central headquarters and has set up offices in every prefecture, all major cities, and most medium-sized cities and towns. Because of the intensity of LDP factionalism and the personal enmities between LDP Dietmen bred by head-to-head competition in the multimember districts, however, the LDP cannot build an organization like those created by the Clean Government and the Communist parties, which are tightly controlled by the party center and penetrate to the local level.

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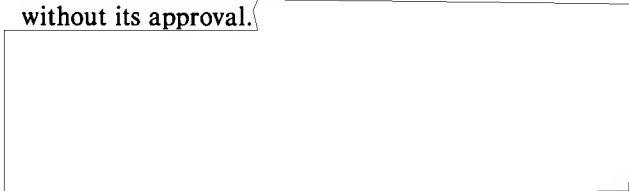
Confidential**Appendix C****The Major *Zoku***

The top-ranking *zoku* in terms of popularity, not surprisingly, is agriculture. The US Embassy in Tokyo estimates that about 80 Dietmen, led by the so-called Gang of Eight, participate in this group. These activists are distributed among—and link together—a number of official party committees and ad hoc commissions:

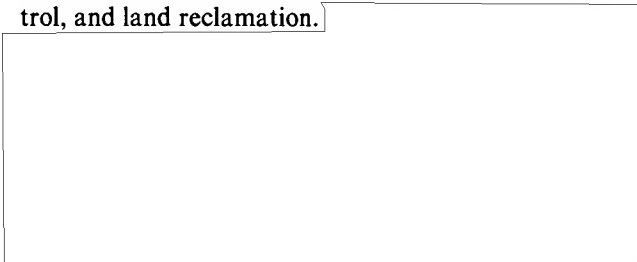
- Some 170 upper and lower house Dietmen are enrolled in the PARC's Agriculture and Forestry Division, which has more subcommittees—13—than any other division.
- The Council's Research Committee on General Farming Administration has 250 members.
- The Diet Member's Council for Farm Community Promotion, with a membership of about 300, specializes in pressing the government to raise the rice price.
- The 160 members of the New Agricultural Administration Study Group concentrate on rice subsidies.



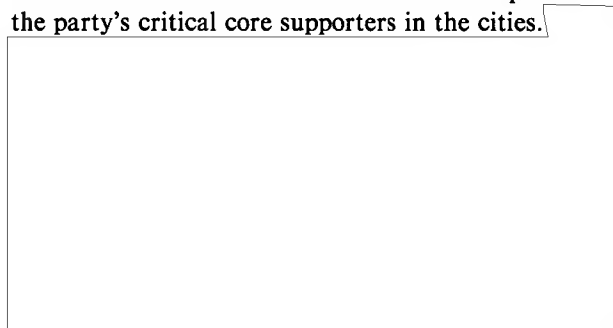
The influence of the agriculture caucus over party and government agricultural policy is formidable. The LDP will not—and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries cannot—take any major initiative without its approval.



The construction *zoku* oversees the allocation of funds for public works: roads, railroads, sewers, flood control, and land reclamation.



The commerce and industry *zoku* is the focal point both for the large manufacturing firms that are a primary source of financial support for the LDP and for the multitude of small businesses that represent the party's critical core supporters in the cities.



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